

**Abstract 217**

**TITLE:** Syringe Acquisition by Puerto Rican Injection Drug Users in Puerto Rico and New York: Comparison of Syringe Exchange Programs

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**BACKGROUND:** Syringe Exchange Programs (SEPs) are the central component of many interventions to reduce HIV among injection drug users (IDUs). This study compares the utilization of SEP services by 280 Puerto Rican IDUs in East Harlem, New York (NY) and Bayamon, Puerto Rico (PR).

**METHODS:** Following targeted sampling plans, outreach workers recruited 165 Puerto Rican IDU in New York and 115 Puerto Rican IDUs in Puerto Rico from January through August, 1998. Chi-square and t-tests were used to analyze data about syringe acquisition and use, including utilization of SEP services, obtained from a structured initial interview. Participant observation focus groups and in-depth individual interviews were used to elucidate survey data and to identify environmental factors influencing syringe acquisition.

**RESULTS:** SEPs are the single most important source of syringes for IDUs in New York accounting for 55.0% of syringes obtained in the prior 30 days. IDUs in Puerto Rico are less likely to obtain syringes from SEPs ( $p < .001$ ), and on average, only 17.6% of their syringes came from this source. During the prior 30 days, IDUs in the two sites accessed SEPs about the same mean number of times (NY, 2.8; PR, 3.0) but a marked difference exists in the mean number of syringe obtained. IDUs in NY received over 11 times more syringes compared to their counterparts in PR (NY, 104.5; PR, 9.2;  $p < .001$ ). An active secondary market in SEP syringes exists in NY in spite of generous syringe exchange policies. IDUs in NY are also more likely to have received HIV/STI risk-reduction materials, prevention literature, and referrals to drug treatment and HIV/TB testing from a SEP ( $p < .001$ ).

**CONCLUSIONS:** IDUs in Puerto Rico obtain a relatively small proportion of syringes from the only source of free syringes (SEPs). A restrictive syringe exchange policy and inadequate program funding limit the number of syringes provided to IDUs at this site. By contrast, SEPs in NY are both the major source of syringes and a bridge to treatment and testing services.

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